

A personal account of the effects of capitalism, the dilemma that we all face, not in particulars but in flavor - the ways that we are all forced into bad situations because of how capitalism influences every part of our most private lives.

“Capitalism is not some abstract thing. It is deeply personal. It creates the channels through which care reaches (or doesn't reach) each of us. And that care [or lack of it] transforms us into who we are.”

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# I, Capitalist

(accounts from a life under the empire)

by Teresa Smith

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by the game of "Just one more dollar, just one more paycheck, just one more lottery ticket, just one more investment..." Soon, we become so invested in our symbol-laden Capitalist Identities, we forget to ask ourselves if the system is worth it. But as we run faster and faster chasing the Idol of Money, why does happiness draw further and further away?

Are we ready to end this game?

Are we ready to evolve?

amount as the average American worker. How could it be possible to earn such an inflated amount of power?

The horrible truth is that money has nothing to do with work, and everything to do with power. The people who are already in power have access to infinite amounts of money because they own our debts, they set our wages, and they print the money that we are given for our labor. And we are tricked into believing that other people can somehow earn this level of power, when the game was rigged in their favor from the beginning.

On top of normalizing the same disparities that existed under Feudalism, the Capitalist myth includes the need for exponential increase of profits. So products will continue to break sooner and sooner, the planet's resources will continue to be devoured, and the conditions for workers will get worse with each passing year. All so the CEOs can convince the investors that their company made a profit. All so the aristocrats can play a game that justifies their own status.

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My mother lives alone in a trailer park now. I visit her a few times a year, and she always asks for money. She knows I don't have any—that I am broke and still haven't paid off my college debt—but she still asks. Old habit, I guess. Perhaps it is the only way she knows how to ask for love.

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A few months after Billy died, some marine biologists found his mother's body floating in a tide pool, her fingers wrapped around the gun in her pocket, her bleached hair dancing with the ebb and flow of the sea.

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None of us chose to be born into Capitalism, but every day, we choose to continue it.

From the moment we received our first grades in school, we became invested in the system—a system of competing to receive symbols instead of working to build love. We became transfixed

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When I was a kid, I used to watch my mother soak things in Whot, sudsy water and then pick the price tags off with her fingernails.

Sometimes, I wish I could soak my soul in that water, that I might cleanse myself of all reminders of the cost of things.

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A few weeks ago, I was sipping tea with my favorite Marxist—he bought me the tea cuz I'm hella broke—and I was telling him how I'd been offered a job that pays \$50 an hour, but I was thinking about not taking it.

"Why not?" he asked. "You need that money."

I had been jobless for over a year, and to survive, I'd been borrowing money from the people I love. My friends were running out of slack, though, and if I didn't find a job soon, I'd have to move out of my coveted Berkeley attic corner (I pay \$215 a month to live in a drafty rat-infested attic with 3 other people) and move back in with my foster parents in the cultural desert of Seattle Suburbia.

"I just don't think I should start working yet..." I grappled to explain. "I mean... being jobless is teaching me something... something about value, about capital, about the way money moves people... and I think... I'm close—really close—to figuring out what money really is."

"No, Teresa," the Marxist gazed at me with intensity. "Money is a magical and elusive thing. You could spend your entire life studying it and never figure out what it is."

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But still, I couldn't stop thinking about money, about the symbols we use to represent value.

In the mid-1800s, Karl Marx devoted himself to the study of capital. So desperate he was to understand the ebb and flow of value that he quit working and spent every waking hour in the London library, studying. He wrote thousands of pages about the

way Capitalism works, creating perhaps the most comprehensive explanation of an economic system ever.

But in his manic efforts to understand it, Marx neglected to participate in the system he was trapped in. ... and the Beast of Capitalism punishes nonparticipation without mercy.

As Marx wrote, four of his children starved to death.

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In December of 1989, I worked my first job. I was five years old, selling sprigs of mistletoe door-to-door for \$1 a bundle and I loved doing it! I still remember one young man who bought a sprig, winked at me, turned around, and held the mistletoe over a woman's head. They kissed like at the end of Little Mermaid, and I beamed at them, proud that my mistletoe had facilitated such an excellent moment.

If someone had told me I was doing it for the money, I would have laughed so hard! But I quickly learned that those little paper rectangles were important: money was the symbol that allowed me to take part in the magical ritual of exchange, an ancient ritual that brings random strangers together to share a few moments of existence before going back to the meantime of our lives.

I made over \$100 selling mistletoe, and gave it all to my mom. Her eyes lit up—just like when the checks arrived from her sisters. My mother usually spent her days locked away in her room, but with a huge wad of cash in her hands, her depression completely dissipated. She had power now. Power to do things beyond the meager allotment sent by the Welfare office.

"Santa is going to bring extra toys this year!" she grinned.

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After college, I traveled to Japan to teach English. I had been looking forward to the job for months—I love teaching! And sure, the students would be paying for the English lessons, but I thought of the monetary exchange as a ritual that would allow the real magic to happen: the sacred connection between human minds grappling to understand a topic.

But after arriving in Japan, I quickly learned that most of my

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So I followed the Marxist's advice and took the \$50 an hour job. But what am I doing for this money? I am tutoring a 15-year-old boy whose name, ironically, is Billy.

Like my cousin, this Billy failed high school English. But unlike Billy, his parents have money. His mother is the CEO of a major oil company, and she is giving me hundreds of dollars a month to help her son raise his grades so he can get into a good college. It is important that her son goes to college—not because college guarantees a job (in fact, a majority of unemployed people right now have a college degree)—but going to college has become part of the myth that entitles people to join the 1% of the population that controls a majority of the planet's resources.

When her Billy is done with college, there will be a six-figure "entry level" job waiting for him, and he will believe he earned it.

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What does it mean when a CEO can spend \$400 a month to have her son tutored, while factory workers must send their children to live in an orphanage? What does it mean when an investor can jet to Sicily for a weekend jaunt, while the restaurant workers that staff the companies he "owns" don't even get paid maternity leave? What does it mean when one community is able to help its homeless youth, while another community cannot?

I'd call this Feudalism, but the truth is, it is much worse.

Our ancestors brought this Demon of Capitalism upon us because they wanted to end the harsh disparities of Feudalism—a system in which 1% of the population claimed absolute power because they were born into "noble families." But Capitalism is simply a new myth to uphold the same disparities:

Now, instead of claiming their power through birthright, the ruling 1% claim they have earned their power. This is the myth that money creates.

Those of us at the bottom of the pyramid receive money for working hard, so we believe the myth that the ruling class also earned their positions. But the average CEO makes 650 times the

we went our separate ways.

A similar coldness has entered all my relationships that involve borrowing money. Being put in the position of begging the people you love for money puts a price on love. Soon, your friends can't trust you to be honest with them. And you wonder if you can trust yourself.

I think I am beginning to understand how my mom and Billy's mom became so twisted: living on the edge of poverty in Capitalism is living on the edge of death. You feel like a vampire, leeching off the people you love just to survive. They say if a vampire tries to eat food, the food will turn to ashes in her mouth. It is like that with love when you are poor and desperate: love is transformed into lifeless scraps of paper before it can reach you. You take the paper so you can eat today, and your heart begins to starve.

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When I was a kid, I used to watch my mother soak things in hot, sudsy water and then pick the price tags off with her fingernails.

But I know I cannot soak my soul in that water, for if I cleansed myself of all marks of cost, nothing would be left.

Because Capitalism is not some abstract thing. It is deeply personal. It creates the channels through which care reaches (or doesn't reach) each of us. And that care transforms us into who we are.

And perhaps my Marxist friend is right: I will never fully understand money. Because the effort to understand money is the effort to understand yourself. It is the effort to understand the flow of power through your life, and the flow of your life as you chase symbols.

I am a hairless mammal. I am completely dependent upon my society for my biological survival. But under Capitalism, my very existence is denied to me if I don't, in some way, interact with money. It is simply a matter of choosing whether I want money to taint my work-life, or whether I want it to taint my friendships...

students weren't interested in the joy of learning; they behaved like customers: arms folded, eyes narrowed, as if it was my job to serve them a Unit-of-English-Language.

For the first time in my life, I learned what it is like to be reduced to an object, a sum of my functions. Some customers treated me so poorly, I wanted to run from the room. But I was held hostage: if I walked out, I'd lose my job. And I needed that job to pay off my college debt.

"How do you stand this place?" I asked my coworker, Ben, who'd worked at the Language Company for several years.

"I don't," he smiled robotically. "When I get to work in the morning, I turn my emotions off. And I don't feel a thing until I leave the office at the end of the day."

"That's horrible!" I said.

"Just wait until your first paycheck comes," Ben replied. "You'll realize it was all worth it."

So when my paycheck came, I tried to make it feel worth it: I drank fine saké with my new friends, traveled to some spiffy ancient shrines, and adorned my body with designer clothes from Osaka's fashion district. But none of these things could make me feel happy—nothing could buy back the 200+ hours I spent each month feeling miserable at work.

I arrived in Japan in summer of '07, just in time to watch the Japanese economy collapse. Every couple days, I'd reach the transit station and the neon signs would be flashing: "All Trains: 45 Minute Delay." This meant that yet another newly-fired businessman had thrown himself in front of a commuter train. It always took the transit workers 45 minutes to clean the flesh from the tracks.

Starting in middle school, Japanese kids are taught to pack their feelings in and work hard—even if the work doesn't make sense, even if they are being treated poorly—for the sake of future remuneration. Like Christians setting aside their own pleasure for the sake of a future reward, Japanese people are taught to displace their pleasure for symbols: grades and money. But when you hollow yourself out for the sake of symbols, what is left when those symbols are taken away?

"You should feel lucky," said my coworker, Steve, "that you

weren't born in China." Before coming to Japan, Steve had spent two years working at an orphanage in China. The parents of the 200+ babies he tended were still alive: they were workers at a nearby purse factory. These people had to work 17-hours-a-day, 6-days-a-week, and if they complained, they risked losing their jobs and starving to death. On Sundays, the workers came to the orphanage to clutch their babies with bloodied fingers. These people received pennies for the each purse they made, which were sold for about \$400 at designer boutiques in Japan, America, and Europe.... so that workers like me could make our paychecks "feel like something."

One day in the break room, my coworkers began discussing the ways they'd thought about killing themselves.

"Sometimes, when a lesson is going really bad," Ben said, "I think about throwing myself off a tall building and smashing through the windows of the building next to it. It would feel so good to go out like that—to use my body to break something."

A few weeks later, I left Japan. I would have to find some other way to pay off my college debt.

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When I was 15-years-old, I learned that college costs extravagant amounts of money, so I informed my mother that I was going to stop giving her cash.

"But I need that money," my mom sounded frightened.

I worked several jobs—shelving books at the library, delivering newspapers, keeping grounds for the landlord—and I gave most of the money to my mom. I thought it was a frivolous thing, that she didn't depend on the money, that it just made her life a little more fun.

"If you need cash," I said, "just ask your sisters."

"Not until they apologize!" A few years before—right around the time I started giving my mom money, actually—she had stopped talking to her wealthy sisters. Three of her five sisters had married rich men, and they sent cash to anyone in the family who groveled hard enough.

"Well," I said, "if you want extra money, you'll have to swallow your pride and talk to your sisters, cuz I'm saving up for college."

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without an earned income, this high-paying job has turned up, but I'm terrified to take it.

I think I've become anorexic about money. As anyone who has suffered from anorexia knows, it isn't about looking skinny: anorexia is all about control. Throughout your life, you watch your weight fluctuate wildly, until finally, you go a little crazy and say "enough is enough" and you just stop eating. That's about how I feel with money right now. I'm terrified to trade my labor for money again, whether it's for \$5 or \$50 an hour because the moment I step back in onto the Capitalist rollercoaster, I will no longer be in control: the market could fluctuate or my job could be eliminated.

And I am tired of having to gamble in order to feed myself.

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But even though I didn't receive any pay this year, I've worked quite hard. I edited newspapers, interned at a publishing house, and staffed a youth program—all as an unpaid volunteer. And it felt great to work without money holding me hostage!

I love working, but I never went to touch money again. Because money cheapens everything. Because once we are told we are working for mere symbols (whether it's grades or cash), we forget our responsibility to check in and be present for the moments that make up being alive, and we forget our responsibility to create real meaning—not just symbolic meaning—in the things we do every day.

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But my friends have run out of slack. And even though I've had a great time working for free this year, my relationships have suffered.

When I lost my job a year ago, I had been living with a man with whom I had been desperately in love. But once I didn't have my own income, a new, horrible power dynamic entered our relationship: I found myself unable to genuinely express my emotions around him because I felt indebted for the food and shelter he provided me. Our love soon grew cold, and after 2 years together,

begin to look like Billy's hometown?

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Recently, I spoke with my computer-savvy friend, Brian, who has worked in the Seattle-area tech-industry for the last 15 years. Brian says working conditions are getting worse every year.

Employers like Microsoft and Google no longer take responsibility for their workers, instead calling them "independent contractors." They only allow these "contractors" to work 5 months out of the year—this allows the employers to legally skirt their duty of providing healthcare for their workers, while also making it difficult for workers to organize and demand better conditions.

In Brian's most recent job, he worked for Google in a warehouse near Seattle. During the stressful 5-month contract, two of Brian's coworkers were arrested for bringing guns to work. Brian blames the horrible conditions: Google imported a boss from the tech sweatshops of India to run the place, and this man had all the workers frantically competing against each other, threatening to fire people who didn't meet the daily work quota. "I have never been forced to work so hard for so little," Brian says.

During Brian's time working for Google, he was hounded by creditors, who took almost his entire paycheck. At one point, Brian was left with \$30 to live on for 2 weeks. During that time, he ate little more than a carton of eggs. Once a shapely man, Brian's skin now hangs from his bones.

In a globalized system of Capitalism, the lowest standard of working anywhere lowers the bar for everyone else on earth. If someone in India or China is willing to do your job at a lower pay and without benefits, then it is only a matter of time before your job is reduced to the same inhumane level, or exported all together.

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As I mentioned earlier, I've been jobless for over a year.

When I first lost my job in January 2011, I furiously hunted for a new one. But as the weeks turned into months of joblessness, I eventually lost hope and stopped looking. Now, after a year

Within the next year, I managed to save over \$3000—almost enough for 6 months tuition. I was off to a good start. But shortly after my 16th birthday, I went to the bank to and discovered my account was empty. My mother had used her Legal Guardian privileges to drain every penny.

So I got better at hiding my money.

But once I was no longer providing for her, my mom started treating her children differently...

By the time I was 17, the household had grown so violent, my younger sister and I were forced to leave.

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"I hate our aunts," said my 14-year-old cousin, Billy.

"You shouldn't say bad things about The Aunties," I said. I was a 21-year-old college student, and wanted to be a positive role model.

"Dude, they lie all the time," Billy said. "And they gossip about my mom."

He was right: I had once heard one of my aunts on the phone with Billy's mom, saying "I love you," and then, immediately after hanging up, she had turned to me and said "My sister is such a worthless person!" Billy's mother had schizophrenia and didn't have a husband. Perhaps that is why her sisters thought it was okay to speak so unkindly about her.

"But the aunties love you," I heard myself say.

"They never visit," Billy countered.

"But they send you and your mom so much money!"

"Yeah, but money isn't love."

I smiled. Money isn't love. Billy was always challenging me to see those horrible truths I so often tried to ignore. That was something I loved about him: he was never afraid to call me on my bullshit.

Two years later, at the age of 16, Billy swallowed a bottle of painkillers.

When Billy died, I had been frantically trying to find a ride out to see him. I had a horrible feeling... But everyone was so busy working, they didn't have time to give me a ride. I don't own my own car, and didn't I have the cash for a Greyhound ticket.



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When my sister and I left home as teenagers, we were lucky enough to be living in the Seattle 'burbs, an area oversaturated with cash.

When local folks found out that my sister and I were "homeless," they shared their food, guest rooms, let us ride their horses, and one family even took us on a one-week vacation to Disneyland. It seemed to make people feel powerful to share their resources and luxuries with us. When we thanked them, they always beamed, saying stuff like "Well, it makes me feel great to share what I have!"

Eventually, one family in town let us stay with them on a permanent basis. Our new foster parents pushed us to finish high school, and helped us get the loans and financial aid we needed to go to college.

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A few days after Billy died, I finally got a ride out to the Oregon Coast to see him. I thought that seeing my cousin's body would create some sort of resolution, but instead, I left the morgue wanting answers.

"Billy was such a nice kid," his English teacher told me, "but he just wouldn't do his homework. So I had to fail him. Then, last month, he dropped out of school..."

"His mom wouldn't let him study," said one of his classmates. "I went over there to help with his homework, and his mom pulled a gun on me—a fucking gun!—and told me to leave. I guess she was jealous or something."

"Sometimes he'd come over to our place for a few hours to hide from his mom," said a neighbor. "We had to send him home at dinnertime, though. We can't be feeding someone else's kid, you know."

It seemed like everyone in the town liked Billy, and knew that he was experiencing intense violence at home. So why hadn't they rallied to help him the way people had rallied around me and my sister? I felt like I'd fallen into some horrible alternative universe.

I asked the priest at Billy's church to explain.

"This town is poor," the priest said as we folded programs for Billy's funeral. "And it gets poorer every year."

The town's economy had tanked in the 1980s after the Oregon fish and lumber industries collapsed. Soon after that, corporate franchises like Wal-Mart and McDonalds moved in. Before long, a majority of people in town were working for the franchises, receiving minimum wage. The low wages made it impossible for people to shop locally, so almost all the local businesses went under. Now, a majority of the town's money was leaving the town's economy, flowing from the franchise cash registers almost directly into the pockets of CEOs and Wall Street investors.

"There are over 500 homeless youth in the area," the priest said. "And countless more at-risk teens. And we are powerless to help any of them. We just don't have the resources."

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My foster dad runs a company in the Seattle area. It's a good company: a firm that cleans up hazardous waste. He thinks capitalism is working.

"Why?" I asked last time I visited home.

"Because companies like mine are able to provide well-paying jobs with health care to almost a hundred people."

But not every company is able to be so noble. Once a company reaches a certain size, the CEOs are legally bound to make more money last quarter than they did this quarter—to make a profit. To facilitate this exponential increase of profits, they must create new markets, reduce the quality of goods, and/or reduce the quality of life for their workers.

My foster dad looked at me with deep concern and admitted, "We give our employees annual raises, but not enough to match the rising cost of living. And we have to slash health benefits every year because the cost of insurance is skyrocketing. This year, we had to cut optical... Next year it might be dental..."

My foster dad is trying to run a good company, but his company is trapped in a competitive profit-based economy, so, just to stay afloat, he is forced to reduce the quality of life for his workers every year.

How long will it be, I wonder, before the suburbs of Seattle